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Commentary

From Conflict to Clarification: A Comment on Egan's "Narrative and Learning: A Voyage of Implications"

HOWARD GARDNER
Harvard Graduate School of Education

More persuasively than other writers, the British art historian, Gombrich (1960), made the case that most works of art are derived from previous works of art created within the same culture. That is, the decisions and strokes made in the course of, say, fashioning a painting are a recapitulation of thousands made by one's predecessors. To be sure, artists will attempt to observe nature with an "innocent eye"; and, on occasion, an artist will succeed in capturing an aspect of nature (or of society) that had previously gone unnoticed or uncaptured in an art form. In rarer circumstances, an innovative or iconoclastic work will actually change the way in which the world comes to be perceived: Such, at any rate, is the meaning of Picasso's oft-quoted remark that Gertrude Stein would come to look like his 1906 portrait of her. But for the most part, a new creation in a medium builds closely on preceding creations, rather than striking out in new directions.

Though Gombrich (1960) concerned himself with the arts, much the same point can be made in the sciences. Most scientific experiments and explanations, and particularly those undertaken in the course of what Kuhn (1970) termed "normal science," are fashioned closely on the model of earlier work in the domain and, more often than not, they bolster and extend the tradition, rather than departing from it in significant respects. Thus, in the fields of cognitive and developmental psychology, researchers build on the ideas of major philosophers like John Locke and Immanuel Kant, on major psychological theorists like Jean Piaget or Jerome Bruner, and on standard experimental paradigms and demonstrations, of the sort that populate textbooks and the most prestigious journals.

After decades of accumulated work in these fields of study, it is not surprising that certain ideas have gained wide currency and are rarely questioned. Chief among them, as Kieran Egan (1993) pointed out in his target article, are the beliefs that young children encounter difficulties dealing with abstractions, that they are consequently attracted to the concrete; and the parallel pair of convic-

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Correspondence and requests for reprints should be sent to Howard Gardner, Harvard Graduate School of Education, 326 Longfellow Hall, Cambridge, MA 02138.

tions that young children are attracted to what is familiar, and have difficulty mastering materials and phenomena that are unfamiliar. Any researcher can quote dozens of studies that support these claims, and many can provide an explanation—one typically based upon British empiricism and associationism—of why children can more readily deal with the concrete and the familiar.

Against this background, Egan raised some discordant points. If, consistent with the "expanding-horizons principle," children more readily learn about familiar things, why are they so attracted to remote scenes (be they a magical land or ancient Greece) and to exotic characters (like the Wizard of Oz or Ninja Turtles)? By the same token, if children experience difficulties in dealing with abstractions, why for centuries have they been intrigued by stories that deal with apparently abstract themes like courage/cowardice or good/evil? Might we in fact be confronting a Gombrich-like situation where researchers are following the noses of their predecessors, rather than attempting with unclouded eyes, to see what their experimental subjects—or what ordinary youngsters—are actually doing?

In considering these questions, I want first to acknowledge the acuteness of Egan's observations. It is indeed true that certain ideas have attained a "received status" that may be unwarranted. And it is equally true that psychologists know much less than they should about the attractiveness exerted by strange characters in faraway lands, and about the extent to which youngsters are actually able (or unable) to deal with abstract concepts. Indeed, in research that Egan did not review (see, e.g., Carey & Gelman, 1990; Gardner, 1991), developmental researchers have been accruing impressive evidence that even toddlers can appreciate quite abstract qualities in the world (ranging from numerosity to animateness to various kinds of causality) and that they will sometimes override strong perceptual or concrete cues in favor of the aforementioned abstract properties (Keil, 1989). Thus, a case can be made, even within psychology, that Egan's critique is on the mark.

Yet, before we can reject the conventional wisdom, before we can treat young children as capable of drawing out abstract distinctions and of securing significant educational benefits from fantastic materials, we need to consider two vexing issues.

Let us turn first to the question of what it means to be able to appreciate abstractions. We can concede that youngsters are not restricted merely to an appreciation of the concrete: Even infants and some animals are able to act on the basis of a detection of relations, such as "larger than" or "the middle one," or to ferret out a common pattern or numerical total in a complex configuration. Yet, to be able to respond in an experiment on the basis of detecting an abstract property is not equivalent to having a conscious appreciation of that property, let alone being able to draw intentionally and flexibly on that abstract property in order to explain a phenomenon.

On my reading of the evidence, children have a strong proclivity to go beyond the particular or the concrete and to discern underlying "more abstract" principles and patterns; and yet, at the same time, those abstracted patterns prove difficult to conceptualize, to talk about, to mobilize for the unpacking of a new phenomenon, let alone a range of phenomena. Rather, these abstractions seem to remain comfortably within the particular examples where they reside, and do not make contact with their equivalents in other realms. The achievement of a flexible, conscious "meta" abstracting capacity is a long process, no doubt aided by education, but quite possibly dependent upon the maturation of certain higher level cognitive structures of the sort identified by Piaget (1976).

A second issue worthy of consideration concerns the difference between an interest in a topic and the capacity to master new material. Egan rightly stressed the importance of engaging the interest of the child but then moved rather swiftly to the inference that mastery will necessarily follow. There is reason to be skeptical. Mastery of material involves, at a minimum, two important features: (1) an understanding of the significance of the material (including the respects in which it challenges earlier beliefs); and (2) ample opportunity to practice and to apply the new material. Recent research on the achievement of understanding documents its difficult and lengthy course, the many obstacles *en route,* the necessity of repeated encounters, and applications in unfamiliar settings (Gardner, 1991). Whereas youngsters may be "turned on" by talking rabbits or dancing robots, we cannot thereby assume that mastery of concepts, disciplines, or understandings embedded in these captivating vehicles will necessarily follow.

In reading Egan's article, I was reminded of my reaction to Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976), an eloquent paean to the power and importance of fairy tales. In his book, Bettelheim argued that youngsters are indeed capable of appreciating the struggles and conflicts in which the characters are engaged, and that they also are sensitive to the changing emotions and motivations experienced by the protagonists over the course of an adventure.

I was charmed but not persuaded by Bettelheim's (1976) claims. In an effort to test their plausibility, I reviewed the extant research on the understanding of literary works and also, with Rubin (& Gardner, 1985), conducted a study of the comprehension of fairy tales. My examination suggested strongly that, although youngsters clearly gain from fantastic tales, they do not understand them in the way that adults do. Asked to group together stories of the sort told in *The Iliad,* youngsters below the age of 8 do so on the basis of surface characteristics (e.g., what clothing characters wear) rather than on the basis of the dominant emotional tone (e.g., a proud Achilles-like character who refuses to bow before a more powerful foe; see Damon, 1967). By the same token, given the opportunity to provide a motivation for a character in a fairy tale, only children in the preadolescent years of childhood become able to indicate why a character in a fairy tale behaves in the way that she or he does (Rubin & Gardner, 1985).

When I mentioned these results to Bettelheim (personal communication, April, 1977), he responded that laboratory research was ill-suited to deal with such subtle issues of literary understanding. In fact, he said, children unconsciously appreciate these distinctions; and he knew that they did from the results of his psychoanalyses of older individuals. It is obviously not proper to attribute Bettelheim's unsatisfactory reply to Egan. But it is proper to ask what kinds of empirical evidence might bear on his claims, and, most importantly, what kinds of evidence might disprove them. In the absence of such crucial experiments, one is faced with the situation where one argues from deep conviction rather than from accumulated evidence.

Two additional points merit mention. First, it is true that, in one sense, fairy tales and Greek myths are exotic: we do not see Greek gods or Grimm monsters in our backyards. Yet, it is erroneous to imply that they are not meaningful within our society. These stories have been related for generations and they are, in some ways, like old friends. Moreover, there exists a wealth of media, commercial goods, and plain-old social reference to these materials: And so, for children, they are certainly as real as historical characters or as contemporaries who live on the other side of town. The most convincing proof for this is the fact that, in cultures that do not share our Euro-classical tradition, stories of a quite different sort are the ones that bear meaning for the population (Lévi-Strauss, 1970).

A more general point: In this and other works, Egan made a powerful case for the role of narrative in the education of young children. While agreeing on the importance of the narrative mode (cf. Bruner, 1986), I am wary of attributing to it an excessively or exclusively dominating role. My own studies have indicated to me that individuals, alone and collectively, benefit from instruction that utilizes a variety of "entry points" (Gardner, 1983, 1991). In addition to an entry through narrative, there are viable entries through the windows of logic, quantification, works of art, "hands-on" experience, and the posing of basic philosophical questions. Even as we should acknowledge the power of the narrative to involve young children, we should recognize that some youngsters learn better through other modes and that many materials can be presented in a number of ways.

On the basis of work carried out thus far on children's narrative capacities, I find reason to embrace a middle ground. On the one hand, Egan is certainly correct in his assertion that developmentalists have too uncritically absorbed the portraits painted by their predecessors. Moreover, even within the field of developmental psychology, evidence accumulates of abstracting abilities that are far greater than most workers would have suspected some decades ago. Yet, the extent to which that abstracting capacity can be mobilized for educational ends remains to be determined. Along a parallel vein, there is no question that youngsters find tremendously alluring the scenes and characters of an exotic setting, including, as Egan pointed out, ones that cut across the usual categorical boundaries. Yet, although engaging materials are clearly desirable, they do not themselves short-circuit the learning process; and one is well advised to use a range of materials that address a variety of intellectual strengths and proclivities. And at least some empirical evidence suggests that fairy tales and Greek myths are not understood by youngsters in the ways that they are understood by older individuals.

Even as thrust and counterthrust add to the appeal of narratives, these activities enrich our scholarly discourse. Daring to look beyond the data and to consider compelling—if enigmatic—phenomena, Egan challenged developmental theorists and researchers to explain the enduring appeal of certain kinds of materials and, to the extent necessary, to revise their theories in the light of these results. One could readily test some of his notions, for example, by rewriting fairy tales without the strong polar oppositions, or without mediating characters, and determine whether children continue to find them engaging. Such work is consequential, for its results would not only enrich our scientific understanding: they also might point the way to more effective educational practice.

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